

Matthew Sous

Testimony: HB 4383, 4993

My name is Matthew Sous, and while I am here to represent Common Cause and their support for these two bills, I would mostly like to speak on these bills in regards to my own personal experiences regarding voter registration. I am a recently graduated student from Central Michigan University. And during my four year stay at the university, I volunteered to take part in and lead several voter registration campaigns. After spending several years registering hundreds of new voters, I can confidently say that I am very familiar with the needs and challenges facing new, student voters, and also of those who attempt to aid these voters in registering to vote.

I would like to begin by detailing some of the challenges facing Michigan's college students today. As of right now, most students live a life of two residencies; their campus residence and their home town residence. When it comes to voter registration, there is no obvious answer as to which residence these students should choose as their registration address, as a matter of fact, strong arguments could be made for either location. On one hand, their campus address is where they spend the majority of their year living, pay local taxes, are subject to local ordinances, and is also the most convenient to vote at on a Tuesday; and on the other hand, their home town residence is often the community in which they grew up and they are more likely to be familiar with the local candidates.

Considering this lack of an obvious choice, it should be up to the voter to choose which location they prefer and it should be just as easy to register at either location. This, however, is sadly not the case. In fact, there are hurdles facing student registration on both of these fronts.

For students wanting to register at their campus location, they are often hampered by the Roger's Law, the hassle of having to change their driver's license address, and the fear that they might risk losing their health coverage on their parent's insurance if they make the change.

For student's wanting to vote at their home town residence address, distance is the largest problem they face. Considering that many students do not attend school close to their family's residence, the task of traveling home to make sure their vote is in order is often an insurmountable inconvenience that prevents many students from registering and voting. In order to avoid this hurdle, many turn to registering to vote by mail and by opting to vote by absentee ballot.

As you already can already guess, the problem with this is that many of these students who register to vote by mail are also first time voters and will not have satisfied the identification requirement of the HAVA of 2002. They will not qualify for an absentee ballot and will thus have few choices but to either travel to their home town on election day to vote in person or beforehand to meet with their home residence's clerk to meet their identification requirement.

House bills 4383 and 4993 will help to solve many of the problems facing students wanting to vote at their home town residence address. They would be able to register to vote in person at their campus' clerk office and immediately qualify for an absentee ballot. What's more, if a student voter had already registered to vote by mail, they would be able to avoid having to travel home and satisfy the HAVA identity requirement in their college town. Finally, the excuse that a student was not able to vote because they couldn't make it home would no longer be an excuse!

I would also like to add that these bills would make it a lot easier for those who organize voter registration campaigns. These campaigns often collect large numbers of voter registration forms that

often have to be delivered to many different clerks around the state. By giving these voter registration campaigners the ability to drop off all their forms at a single clerk's office, this legislation would greatly reduce the number of errors these organizations often have when forwarding registrations.

And lastly, I do have some suggestions as to how this package could be improved. Since we are already asking our state's clerks to forward voter registrations and identifications, could we not also ask them to forward absentee ballot requests? Rather than having to travel to or mail a request to their home, I think the ability to request an absentee ballot at any clerk's office in the state would do a lot to help increase absentee ballot usage. This would also make it easier for those who have not yet attained their identification requirement to get an absentee ballot, as they would have the ability to request an absentee ballot in the same office in which they are fulfilling their identification requirement. Further, this addition would not only make it easier for voters, but it would also make it more convenient for voter registration campaigns that have also taken up assisting voters in getting absentee ballots.

Overall, these bills are a good step in the right direction for easing some of the hurdles preventing student registration and voting. Even if they are passed, however, there is still a lot more work to do. While they do address some of the problems facing students wanting to vote at their home town residence, more work needs to be done to attain the same level of ease for students wishing to vote at their campus location. I do not need to emphasize to you the importance of youth participation in our electoral system. By working to encourage good voting habits early, we not only add an oft ignored voice to our political discourse, but we also lay the foundation for a larger and more active electorate in our state's future. Thank you for your work on these bills, I look forward to seeing them and other reforms aimed at increasing student participation reaching our governor's desk as soon as possible.